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P E D R I N H A S

We moderns pride ourselves on uninhibited speech. Scorning the use of euphemisms, we call a spade a spade. In modern literature the intimate experiences of life and the common bodily functions are described with a frankness that would have been extremely shocking to our grandmothers in the "gay nineties". Brazilians are equally frank, or perhaps more so than ourselves; not from modernism, however, but from long established custom.

Generally speaking, Brazilian girls and women are very modest and conservative in dress and behavior. While until recently girls in the interior never wore shorts, even for sports, The double standard obtains in this realm, however. I have seen young men playing volley ball in loose fitting shorts, with no support underneath; and the occasional exposures resulting did not seem to perturb in the least either the player or the spectators. Little boys, up to six or eight years of age, very commonly run about the house, and play in the streets, without a vestige of clothing, but it is very rare to see little girls naked. It is very common to photograph boy babies naked, full face view, giving prominence to the genitals. I once saw a newsreel of a scene on the beach at Rio de Janeiro, in which the camera man brought into sharp focus a little boy of three or four, playing naked on the beach; and the people in the theatre seemed to think it was very cute. I saw on a streetcar in Recife an advertisement of some kidney medicine, which showed three little boys -- a rear view this time -- sending streams of urine high into the air, apparently aiming at the moon, which also appeared in the picture.

Brazilian women are modest, but are not bothered by a squeamish false modesty. Traveling on a Brazilian steamer from Rio to Recife, my wife was surprised and somewhat shocked to notice that the stewards entered freely into the women's bathroom, though not, of course, going into the individual stalls where the baths and toilets were located, if these were occupied. On Brazilian trains there is in each car only one lavatory and toilet for both sexes; and a Brazilian lady seems to feel not the least embarrassment in waiting at the door for a man to come out so that she may go in.

Thus Brazilian speech is often plain. A group of men and women had been spending the day at a fazenda, and just before starting on the long drive back to town some watermelons were cut and served. The fazendeiro remarked jovially, "It's a cinch you'll never make it back to town without stopping by the wayside to get rid of some of this water." Oftentimes at a wedding people will joke the bride with some such words as, "Daqui há nove meses você está cheia de menino", (Nine months from now you'll be full of baby). The bride takes no offense, but gigglingly replies, "Se Deus quiser" (If God will). An American woman, noticeably pregnant, may be somewhat disconcerted the first time that a clerk in a store, a total stranger, remarks to her, "Our country seems to agree with you, you're getting fat"; but the experience comes to be so common that she gets to think nothing of it.

The Brazilians seem to feel that facts that cannot be avoided are best faced frankly. Most Brazilian houses built prior to 1940, and many of the newer ones, are left unceiled overhead, and the interior walls go up only so far as where the ceiling would be if there were one, thus leaving a great, undivided air space in the top of the house, contributing greatly to the coolness of the rooms, but little to the privacy. One must be careful of conversation in the bedrooms, for anything said may easily be overheard in the next room; and any sound inadvertently made is likely to reverberate through the whole house. A friend of mine told me of spending the night at such a house, on a fazenda, where there were several nearly grown daughters. The beds were home made, and instead of springs had rawhide stretched over a wooden frame, making an excellent sounding board. After retiring, my friend incautiously made a sound, which was answered from the next room, then again from another, and so on, back and forth through the house. The next morning the girls talked and laughed quite unabashedly about the "concert" of the night before.

An American long resident in Brazil told me of being once on a streetcar in Recife, when the streetcar track was chosen as a trysting spot by a pair of amorous donkeys. The motorman jangled his bell in vain; donkeys are stolid brutes, and not easily disturbed. Of course they were in plain sight of all the passengers. The motorman would have descended from the car to see what means of persuasion might be applied,



but the men among the passengers cried out, "Deixa éle acabar; faz muito mal aos rins". (Don't bother him till he's ready to move; it's bad for the kidneys).

In November, 1948 I accompanied a group of about twenty-five high school seniors on an excursion to Paulo Afonso Falls. A bus was chartered for the trip. The roads, while permitting fairly rapid travel for a car, are in many places so rough that a bus must proceed very slowly; and it was about eight o'clock at night when we reached Delmiro, or Pedra, as it was formerly called, a short distance from the falls. We had telegraphed to the leading hotel, asking for reservations for our party; but we had failed to take into account the fact that it was a holiday week-end, and that many other people would be coming to the falls. The hotel had received our telegram too late to reply, but was already full before receiving it. The other hotels were full also. As luck would have it, one of our girls lived at Delmiro, and with characteristic Brazilian hospitality she, or rather her parents, took all the girls into their home -- ten girls and a woman teacher. They sent and borrowed hammocks, and made room for all of them -- and fed them all, too.

The girls disposed of, I breathed more freely; boys can sleep anywhere. We found a pensão where the people agreed to feed us, and to arrange hammocks for as many as possible; and the other boys slept, or tried to sleep, in the bus. A hammock is really a very comfortable place to sleep, unexcelled for a hot climate. I was so fortunate as to have my hammock swung in a corner of the sala, where I was undisturbed, and had an excellent night's sleep. Most of the hammocks were hung on the back veranda, and the bath room was located at the end of the veranda. Whenever anyone went to the bathroom he must pass under each of the hammocks, which was practically impossible without lifting it. The boys did not mind disturbing one another anyway, but would politely say, "Com licença" (excuse me), as they lifted the hammock to pass under; and so on, down the line. Pretty soon he would be coming back, doing it all over again, "Com licença"; "Com licença", "Com licença," all the way back. One of the boys, diminutive in stature, bore the nickname "Ratinho" (Mouse), and it so happened that a cat came and jumped into the hammock with him during the night. When it became known he came in for a lot of teasing, the boys claiming that he had fled in terror.

The following day we visited the falls, and had a very agreeable time. One feature of the falls is the prettily colored pebbles that are brought down by the river, and may be picked up along the river banks. They are not remarkably prettier than other pebbles, but the fact that they came from the falls would make them interesting as souvenirs, and they were constantly being offered for sale by children at the falls. Some of the pupils bought them, but most preferred to seek them for themselves, so that apanhar pedrinhas (picking up pebbles) became one of the chief diversions of the day. The São Francisco River has its headwaters in the famous diamond mining country of Minas Geraes, and I always hoped that I would come across a diamond that had been brought all the way from Minas; but of course I never did.

After a day at the falls we started home, going by another route. It was farther, but the road was better, most of the way, though we did hit a long stretch of difficult sand. Along in the afternoon we came to a field where there were countless thousands of pebbles lying exposed, and someone suggested, "Vamos apanhar pedrinhas". The real need was more for bodily relief than for pebbles, but that made as good an excuse as any, and the boys wandered in one direction, the girls in another, picking up pedrinhas. Thereafter, throughout the rest of the journey, when there was need for stopping, it was said to be for pedrinhas.

About ten-thirty that night we arrived at Arcoverde, also known as Rio Branco, a good sized town, where, we had been assured, there was a hotel large enough that there would certainly be room for all our party. And there was.

Interior hotels in Brazil are not noted for their sanitary facilities. One of the girls, hearing through the thin partition that separated the unceiled rooms, and recognizing the voice of Dijon, one of her classmates, called out to him:

"Ó Dijon".

"Hein?"

"No quarto da gente não tem pinico não. No de vocês tem?" (There's no pot in our room. Do you have one?)



"Tem, sim, senhorita."

"Quer me emprestar?" (Will you lend it to me?)

"Pois não", (of course) and in a few minutes he knocked at her door, and presented the necessary vessel to her -- full to the brim.

The girl saw in this nothing more than a good joke. "Presta não," she said laughing, "está cheio de pedrinhas." (No good, it's full of pebbles.)